



one. Sephy

I wriggled my toes, enjoying the feel of the warm sand trickling like fine baby powder between them. Digging my feet even deeper into the dry, yellow-white sand, I tilted back my head. It was such a beautiful August afternoon. Nothing bad could ever happen on a day like today. And what made it even better was the fact that I could share it – something rare and special in itself, as I knew only too well. I turned to the boy next to me, my face about to split wide open from the smile on it.

‘Can I kiss you?’

My smile faded. I stared at my best friend. ‘Pardon?’

‘Can I kiss you?’

‘What on earth for?’

‘Just to see what it’s like,’ Callum replied.

Yeuk! I mean, *yeuk*!! I wrinkled up my nose – I couldn’t help it. Kissing! Why on earth would Callum want to do anything so . . . so feeble?

‘Do you really want to?’ I asked.

Callum shrugged. ‘Yeah, I do.’

‘Oh, all right then.’ I wrinkled up my nose again at the prospect. ‘But make it fast!’

Callum turned to kneel beside me. I turned my head up towards his, watching with growing curiosity to see what

he'd do next. I tilted my head to the left. So did he. I tilted my head to the right. Callum did the same. He was moving his head like he was my reflection or something. I put my hands on Callum's face to keep it still and dead centre.

'D'you want me to tilt my head to the left or the right?' I asked, impatiently.

'Er . . . which way do girls usually tilt their heads when they're being kissed?' asked Callum.

'Does it matter? Besides, how should I know?' I frowned. 'Have I ever kissed a boy before?'

'Tilt your head to the left then.'

'My left or your left?'

'Er . . . your left.'

I did as asked. 'Hurry up, before I get a crick in my neck.'

Callum licked his lips before his face moved slowly closer towards mine.

'Oh no you don't,' I drew back. 'Wipe your lips first.'

'Why?'

'You just licked them.'

'Oh! OK!' Callum wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

I moved forward to resume my original position. Keeping my lips tight together, I wondered what I should do with them. Purse them so that they stuck out slightly? Or should I smile to make them seem wider and more appealing? I'd only ever practised kissing with my pillow. This was a lot different – and seemed just as silly!

'Hurry up!' I urged.

I kept my eyes wide open as I watched Callum's face

move down towards mine. Callum's grey eyes were open too. I was going cross-eyed trying to keep my focus on his face. And then his lips were touching mine. How funny! I'd expected Callum's lips to be hard and dry and scaly like a lizard's skin. But they weren't. They were soft. Callum closed his eyes. After a moment, I did the same. Our lips were still touching. Callum's mouth opened, making mine open at the same time. Callum's breath mingled with mine and felt warm and sweet. And then without warning his tongue was touching mine.

'Yeuk!' I drew back immediately and stuck my tongue out, wiping it with my hand. 'What did you do that for?'

'It wasn't that bad, was it?'

'I don't want your tongue on mine.' I shook my head.

'Why not?'

' 'Cause . . .' I shuddered at the thought of it, ' . . . our spit will mix up.'

'So? It's meant to.'

I considered this.

'Well?'

'OK! OK!' I frowned, adding. 'The things I do for you! Let's try it again.'

Callum smiled at me, the familiar twinkle in his eyes. That's the thing about Callum – he looks at me a certain way and I'm never quite sure if he's laughing at me. Before I could change my mind, Callum's lips were already on mine – and just as soft and gentle as before. His tongue flicked into my mouth again. After a brief moment of thinking *ugh!* I found that it wasn't too bad. In fact it was actually quite nice in a gross-to-think-about-but-OK-to-do sort of way. I closed my

eyes and began to return Callum's kiss. His tongue licked over mine. It was warm and wet but it didn't make me want to heave. And then my tongue did the same to him. I began to feel a little strange. My heart was beginning to thump in a peculiar, hiccupy way that made me feel like I was racing down a roller-coaster, roaring out of control. Someone was tying knots with my insides. I pulled away.

'That's enough.'

'Sorry.' Callum sat back.

'Why're you apologizing?' I frowned. 'Didn't you like it?'

Callum shrugged. 'It was OK.'

I was annoyed. I didn't know why, but I couldn't help it. 'Have you kissed any other girls besides me?'

'No.'

'Any Cross girls?'

'No.'

'Any nought girls?'

'No means no.' Callum huffed with exasperation.

'So why did you want to kiss me?'

'We're friends, aren't we?' Callum shrugged.

I relaxed into a smile. 'Of course we are.'

'And if you can't kiss your friends then who can you kiss?' Callum smiled.

I turned back to the sea. It shone like a shattered mirror, each fragment reflecting and dazzling. It never ceased to amaze me just how beautiful the sand and the sea and the gentle breeze on my face could be. My family's private beach was my favourite place in the whole world. Kilometres of coastline that was all ours, with just a couple

of signs declaring that it was private property and some old wooden fencing at each end, through which Callum and I had made a gap. And I was here with my favourite person. I turned to look at Callum. He was looking at me, the strangest expression on his face.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘Nothing.’

‘What’re you thinking?’ I asked.

‘About you and me.’

‘What about us?’

Callum turned to look out over the sea. ‘Sometimes I wish there was just you and me and no-one else in the whole world.’

‘We’d drive each other crazy, wouldn’t we?’ I teased.

At first I thought that Callum wasn’t going to answer.

‘Sephy, d’you ever dream of just . . . escaping? Hopping on the first boat or plane you come across and just letting it take you away.’ There was no mistaking the wistfully wishful note in Callum’s voice. ‘I do . . .’

‘Where would you go?’

‘That’s just the point,’ Callum said with sudden bitterness. ‘This place is like the whole world and the whole world is like this place. So where could I go?’

‘This place isn’t so bad, is it?’ I asked, gently.

‘Depends on your point of view,’ Callum replied. ‘You’re on the inside, Sephy. I’m not.’

I couldn’t think of an answer to that, so I didn’t reply. We both sat in silence for a while longer.

‘Wherever you went, I’d go with you,’ I decided. ‘Though you’d soon get bored with me.’

Callum sighed. A long, heartfelt sigh which immediately

made me feel like I'd failed some test I hadn't even known I was taking.

'We'd better get on with it,' he said at last. 'What's the lesson for today, teacher?'

Disappointment raced through me. But then, what did I expect? *'Seph, I could never be bored of you, with you, around you. You're exciting, scintillating, overwhelming company!'* Yeah, right! Dream on, Sephy!!

'So what're we doing today?' Callum's voice was tinged with impatience.

'OK! OK!' I said, exasperated. Honestly! The sun was too warm and the sea was too blue to do any schoolwork. 'Callum you've already passed the entrance exam. Why do we still have to do this?'

'I don't want to give any of the teachers an excuse to kick me out.'

'You haven't even started school yet and already you're talking about being kicked out?' I was puzzled. Why was he so cynical about my school? 'You've got nothing to worry about. You're in now. The school accepted you.'

'Being in and being accepted are two different things.' Callum shrugged. 'Besides, I want to learn as much as I can so I don't look like a complete dunce.'

I sat up suddenly. 'I've just had a thought. Maybe you'll be in my class. Oh, I do hope so,' I said eagerly. 'Wouldn't that be great?'

'You think so?'

I tried – and failed, I think – to keep the hurt out of my voice. 'Don't you?'

Callum looked at me and smiled. 'You shouldn't answer a question with a question,' he teased.

‘Why not?’ I forced myself to smile back.

Taking me by surprise, Callum pushed me over onto the sand. Indignant, I scrambled up to kneel in front of him.

‘D’you mind?’ I huffed.

‘No. Not at all.’ Callum smirked.

We looked at each other and burst out laughing. I stopped laughing first.

‘Callum, wouldn’t . . . wouldn’t you like to be in my class . . .?’

Callum couldn’t meet my eyes. ‘It’s a bit . . . humiliating for us noughts to be stuck in the baby class.’

‘What d’you mean? I’m not a baby.’ I jumped to my feet, scowling down at him.

‘Jeez, Sephy, I’m fifteen, for heaven’s sake! In six months’ time I’ll be sixteen and they’re still sticking me in with twelve- and thirteen-year-olds. How would you like to be in a class with kids at least a year younger than you?’ Callum asked.

‘I . . . well . . .’ I sat back down.

‘Exactly!’

‘I’m fourteen in three weeks,’ I said, unwilling to let it drop.

‘That’s not the point, and you know it.’

‘But the school explained why. You’re all at least a year behind and . . .’

‘And whose fault is that?’ Callum said with erupting bitterness. ‘Until a few years ago we were only allowed to be educated up to the age of fourteen – and in noughts-only schools at that, which don’t have a quarter of the money or resources that your schools have.’

I had no answer.

‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to bite your head off.’

‘You didn’t.’ I said. ‘Are any of your friends from your old school going to join you at Heathcrofts?’

‘No. None of them got in,’ Callum replied. ‘I wouldn’t’ve got in either if you hadn’t helped me.’

He made it sound like an accusation. I wanted to say sorry and I had no idea why.

Callum sighed. ‘Come on, we’d better get to work . . .’

‘OK.’ I turned and dug into my bag for my school books. ‘What d’you want to do first? Maths or History?’

‘Maths. I like Maths.’

‘Yeuk!’ I shook my head. How could anyone in their right mind like Maths?! Languages were my favourite subjects, followed by Human Biology and Sociology and Chemistry. Maths fought with Physics for the subject I liked the least. ‘Right then. Maths it is.’ I wrinkled my nose. ‘I’ll tell you what I’ve been revising over the last week and then you can explain it to me!’

Callum laughed. ‘You should get into Maths. It’s the universal language.’

‘Says who?’

‘Says anyone with any sense. Look at how many different languages are spoken on our planet. The only thing that doesn’t change, no matter what the language, is Maths. And it’s probably the same on other planets too.’

‘Pardon?’

‘That’s probably how we’ll talk to aliens from other planets when they get here or when we get to them. We’ll use Maths.’

I stared at Callum. Sometimes when I talked to him, the seventeen months between us seemed to stretch to seventy years. 'Are . . . are you winding me up?'

Callum's smile was no answer.

'Stop it! You're giving me a headache.' I frowned. 'Can we just get on with the Maths in my book and forget about chatting with aliens for a while?'

'OK,' Callum said at last. 'But Sephy, you should think above and beyond just us. You should free your mind and think about other cultures and other planets and oh, I don't know, just think about the future.'

'I've got plenty of time to think about the future when I'm tons older and don't have much future left, thank you very much. And my mind is quite free enough.'

'Is it?' Callum asked slowly. 'There's more to life than just us noughts and you Crosses.'

My stomach jerked. Callum's words hurt. Why did they hurt? 'Don't say that . . .'

'Don't say what?'

'*Us* noughts and *you* Crosses.' I shook my head. 'It makes it sound like . . . like you're in one place and I'm in another, with a huge, great wall between us.'

Callum looked out across the sea. 'Maybe we are in different places . . .'

'No, we aren't. Not if we don't want to be, we aren't.' I willed Callum to look at me.

'I wish it was that simple.'

'It is.'

'Maybe from where you're sitting.' At last Callum turned towards me, but his expression stemmed the words I was about to say. And then, just like that, his expression

cleared and his easy smile was back. 'You're very young, Sephy.'

'I'm only a year and a bit younger than you, so don't start talking down to me.' I fumed. 'I get enough of that at home.'

'OK! OK! Sorry!' Callum raised his hand in a placatory manner. 'Now then, how about some Maths?'

Still annoyed, I opened my school study book. Callum shuffled closer until his arm and mine were touching. His skin was warm, almost hot – or was it mine? It was hard to tell. I handed him the book and watched as the pages on polygons instantly caught and held his attention.

Callum was the one person in the world I could tell anything and everything to without having to think twice about it. So why did I now feel so . . . out of step? Like he was leaving me behind? He suddenly seemed so much older, not just in years but in the things he knew and had experienced. His eyes were a lot older than fifteen. My eyes were different – they reflected my exact age, less than one month away from my fourteenth birthday. Not a day less and certainly not a day more. I didn't want things to change between us – ever. But at that moment I felt as if I might as well stand on the beach and command the sea never to move again.

'How does this bit work?' Callum asked, pointing to an interior angle of a regular octagon.

I shook my head, telling myself not to be so silly. Nothing would ever come between me and Callum. I wouldn't let it. Neither would Callum. He needed our friendship just as much as I did.

Needed . . . That was a strange way to put it. Why had

I thought of it that way? As a friendship both of us needed? That didn't make any sense at all. I had friends at school. And a huge, extended family with cousins and aunts and uncles, and plenty of great whatevers and great-great whatevers to send Christmas and birthday cards to. But it wasn't the same as Callum and me. Callum glanced up impatiently. I smiled at him. After a brief puzzled look, he smiled back.

'It works like this,' I began and we both looked down at the book as I began to explain.

'We'd better be getting back – before your mum has every police officer in the country searching for you,' Callum said at last.

'Suppose so.' I picked up my sandals and rose to my feet. Then I had a brilliant idea. 'Why don't we go back to yours? I haven't been to your house in ages and I could always phone up Mother once I'm there and . . .'

'Better not,' Callum said, shaking his head. He'd started shaking his head the moment the suggestion had left my mouth. He picked up my bag and slung it over his shoulder.

I frowned at Callum. 'We used to be in and out of each other's houses all the time . . .'

'Used to be. Let's leave it for a while – OK?'

'How come I never go to your house any more? Aren't I welcome?'

'Course you are. But the beach is better,' Callum shrugged and set off.

'Is it because of Lynette? 'Cause if it is, I really don't mind about your sister being . . . being . . .'

trailed off at Callum's furious expression.

'Being what?' Callum prompted, fiercely.

'Nothing,' I shrugged. 'Sorry.'

'This has nothing to do with Lynette,' Callum snapped.

I immediately shut up. I seemed to have an acute case of foot-in-mouth disease today. We walked back in silence. Up the stone steps, worn to satin smoothness by the procession of centuries of feet and along the cliff side, heading further and further inland, away from the sea. I looked across the open grassland towards the house which dominated the view for kilometres around. My parents' country house. Seven bedrooms and five reception rooms for four people. What a waste. Four people in such a vast house – four lonely peas rolling about in a can. We were still some distance from it but it rose like an all-seeing giant above us. I pretended I didn't see Callum flinch at the sight of it. Is it any wonder I preferred the laughter of his house to the dignified silence of my own? We walked on for wordless minutes until Callum's steps slowed and stopped altogether.

'What's wrong?' I asked.

'It's just . . .' Callum turned to face me. 'It doesn't matter. Give me a hug?'

Why was Callum in such a touchy-feely mood this afternoon? After a moment's hesitation, I decided not to ask. Callum looked different. What I'd thought of as a permanent teasing sparkle in his eyes when he looked at me was gone without a trace. His eyes were storm-grey and just as troubled. He ran his fingers over his short-cut, chestnut brown hair in a gesture that seemed almost nervous. I opened my arms and stepped towards Callum.

I wrapped my arms around him, my head on his shoulder. He was holding me, squeezing me too tightly but I didn't say a word. I held my breath so it wouldn't hurt so much. Just when I thought I'd have to gasp or protest, Callum suddenly let me go.

'I can't go any further,' Callum said.

'Just up to the rose garden.'

'Not today.' Callum shook his head. 'I have to go.' He handed back my bag.

'I am going to see you tomorrow after school, aren't I? In our usual place?'

Callum shrugged. He was already walking away.

'Callum, wait! What's the ma . . ?'

But Callum was running now – faster and faster. I watched my best friend tear away from me, his hands over his ears. What was going on? I carried on walking up to the house, my head bent as I tried to figure it out.

'PERSEPHONE! INSIDE! NOW!'

My head snapped up at the sound of my mother's voice. Mother came hurtling down the steps, her expression dour and fierce – as always. She'd obviously not had as many glasses of wine today as she normally did, otherwise she wouldn't be in such a bad mood. I turned back to where Callum had been, but he was already out of sight – which was just as well. Mother grabbed my arm with bony fingers that bit like pincers.

'I have been calling you for the last half an hour.'

'You should've called louder then. I was down on the beach.'

'Don't be cheeky. I told you not to wander off today.' Mother started dragging me up the stairs behind her.

‘Ouch!’ I banged my shin against one of the stone steps where I’d been too slow to pick up my feet. I tried to bend to rub my bruised skin but Mother was still dragging me.

‘Let go. Stop pulling me. I’m not luggage.’ I pulled my arm out of Mother’s grasp.

‘Get in the house now.’

‘Where’s the fire?’ I glared at Mother as I rubbed my arm.

‘You’re not to leave the house for the rest of the day.’ Mother entered the house. I had no choice but to follow.

‘Why not?’

‘ ’Cause I said so.’

‘What’s the . . . ?’

‘And stop asking so many questions.’

I scowled at Mother but she was oblivious – as always. To her, my dirty looks were water off a duck’s feathers. The warm, wonderful afternoon was excluded from our house with the closing of the front door. Mother was one of those ‘refined’ women who could make the quiet closing of a door as forceful as a slam. Every time Mother looked at me, I could feel her wishing that I was more ladylike, like my scabby big sister, Minerva. I called her Minnie for short when I wanted to annoy her, because she hated it so much. I called her Minnie all the time. She loved our house as much as I hated it. She called it ‘grand’. To me it was like a bad museum – all cold floors and marble pillars and carved stonework which glossy magazines loved to photograph but which no-one with half a gram of sense would ever want to live in.

Thank God for Callum. I hugged the knowledge of

how I'd spent my day to myself with a secret smile. Callum had kissed me. Wow!

Callum had actually *kissed* me!

Wowee! *Zowee!*

My smile slowly faded as a unbidden thought crept into my head. There was just one thing that stopped my day from being entirely perfect. If only Callum and I didn't have to sneak and creep around.

If only Callum wasn't a nought.

two. Callum



'I live in a palace with golden walls and silver turrets and marble floors . . .' I opened my eyes and looked at my house. My heart sank. I closed my eyes again. 'I live in a mansion with mullion windows and leaded light case-ments and a swimming pool and stables in the acres and acres of grounds.' I opened one eye. It still hadn't worked. 'I live in a three up, two down house with a lock on the front door and a little garden where we grow veggies.' I opened both eyes. It never worked. I hesitated outside my house – if you could call it that. Every time I came back from Sephy's, I flinched at the sight of the shack that was meant to be my home. Why couldn't my family live in a house like Sephy's? Why didn't any nought I knew of live in a house like Sephy's? Looking at our rundown hovel, I

could feel the usual burning, churning sensation begin to rise up inside me. My stomach tightened, my eyes began to narrow . . . So I forced myself to look away. Forced myself to look around at the oak and beech and chestnut trees that lined our street, lifting their branches up to the sky. I watched a solitary cloud slowdance above me, watched a swallow dart and soar without a care in the world.

‘Come on . . . you can do this . . . do this . . . do this . . .’ I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Steeling myself, I pushed open the front door and walked inside.

‘Where’ve you been, Callum? I was worried sick.’

Mum launched in before I’d even closed the door behind me. There was no hall or passageway with rooms leading off it like in Sephy’s house. As soon as you opened our front door, there was our living room with its fifth-hand threadbare nylon carpet and its seventh-hand cloth sofa. The only thing in the room that was worth a damn was the oaken table. Years before, Dad had cut it and shaped it and carved the dragon’s leaf pattern into it, put it together and polished it himself. A lot of love and work had gone into that table. Sephy’s mother had once tried to buy it but Mum and Dad wouldn’t part with it.

‘Well? I’m waiting, Callum. Where were you?’ Mum repeated.

I sat down at my place around the table and looked away from Mum. Dad wasn’t bothered about me – or anything else, for that matter. He was totally focused on his food. Jude, my seventeen-year-old brother, grinned knowingly at me. He’s a really irritating toad. I looked away from him as well.

‘He was with his dagger friend.’ Jude smirked.

I scowled at him. 'What dagger friend? If you don't know what you're talking about you should shut your mouth.' *Don't you call my best friend that . . . Say that again and I'll knock you flat . . .*

Jude could see what I was thinking because his smirk broadened. 'What should I call her then? Your dagger what?'

He never called them Crosses. They were always *daggers*.

'Why don't you go and get stuffed?!'

'Callum, son, don't talk to your brother like . . .' Dad didn't get any further.

'Callum, were you with *her* again?' Mum's eyes took on a fierce, bitter gleam.

'No, Mum. I went for a walk, that's all.'

'That had better be all.' Mum banged down the dinner pan. Pasta sloshed over the sides and onto the table. Seconds later, Jude had whipped up the overspill and it was in his mouth!

Astounded seconds ticked past as everyone at the table stared at Jude. He even had Lynette's attention – and that was saying something. Not much brought my sister out of her mysterious world.

'How come the only time you move faster than greased lightning is when food is involved?' Mum said, her lips twitching somewhere between disgust and amusement.

'It's called incentive, Mum,' Jude grinned.

Amusement won. Mum started to laugh. 'I'll give you incentive, my lad!'

And for once I was grateful to Jude for drawing attention away from what I'd been doing all afternoon. I

glanced around the table. Already Lynette was turning away, her head bowed as always, her attention on her lap – as always.

‘Hi, Lynny . . .’ I spoke softly to my big sister. She looked up and gave me the briefest of smiles before returning her gaze to her lap.

My sister looks like me – the same brown hair, eyes the same shade of grey. Jude’s got black hair and brown eyes and looks like Mum. Lynny and I don’t look like Mum or Dad particularly. Maybe that’s part of the reason why we’ve always been close. Closer than Jude and I. She was the one who looked after me when Mum had to work and couldn’t take me with her. But now she can’t even look after herself. She’s a bit simple. She looks her age, twenty, but her mind is outside time. She’s away with the fairies as my grandma used to say. She wasn’t always that way. Three years ago something happened which changed her. An accident. And just like that the sister I knew was gone. Now she doesn’t go out, doesn’t talk much, doesn’t think much as far as I can tell. She just *is*. She stays lost in the middle of her own world somewhere. We can’t get in and she doesn’t come out. Not often anyway, and certainly not for any length of time. But her mind takes her to somewhere kind, I think, to judge by the peaceful, serene look on her face most of the time. Sometimes I wondered if it was worth losing your marbles to find that kind of peace. Sometimes I envied her.

‘So where have you been all this time?’ Mum resumed her previous conversation.

And I’d thought I’d got away with it. I should’ve guessed that Mum wouldn’t let the matter rest. Once she

gets a bee in her knickers . . .

‘Just walking, I told you.’

‘Hhmmm . . .’ Mum’s eyes narrowed but she turned around and headed back to the cooker for the mince. I breathed an outward sigh of relief. Mum was obviously tired because for once she’d chosen to believe me.

Lynette gave me one of her secret smiles. She turned to spoon pasta onto her plate as Mum returned with the pan of mince.

‘Ready for school tomorrow, Callum?’ Dad said warmly, seemingly oblivious to the instant tension rising up around the table like razor wire.

‘Ready as I’ll ever be, Dad,’ I muttered, pouring myself a glass of milk from the dinner jug so that I wouldn’t have to look at anyone.

‘It’ll be tough, son, but at least it’s a start. My son is going to Heathcroft High School. Imagine that!’ Dad took a deep breath, his chest actually puffing up with pride as he smiled at me.

‘I still think he’s making a big mistake . . .’ Mum sniffed.

‘Well, I don’t.’ Dad’s smile vanished as he turned to Mum.

‘He doesn’t need to go to their schools. We noughts should have our own schools with the same opportunities that the Crosses enjoy,’ Mum retorted. ‘We don’t need to mix with them.’

‘What’s wrong with mixing?’ I asked, surprised.

‘It doesn’t work,’ Mum replied at once. ‘As long as the schools are run by Crosses, we’ll always be treated as second-class, second-best nothings. We should look after and

educate our own, not wait for the Crosses to do it for us.'

'You never used to believe that,' said Dad.

'I'm not as naïve as I used to be – if that's what you mean,' Mum replied.

I opened my mouth to speak but the words wouldn't come. They were just a jumble in my head. If a Cross had said that to me, I'd be accusing them of all sorts. It seemed to me we'd practised segregation for centuries now and that hadn't worked either. What would satisfy all the noughts and the Crosses who felt the same as Mum? Separate countries? Separate planets? How far away was far enough? What was it about the differences in others that scared some people so much?

'Meggie, if our boy is going to get anywhere in this life, he has to go to their schools and learn to play the game by their rules. He just has to be better at it, that's all.'

'That's all?'

'Don't you want something more for your son than we ever had?' Dad asked, annoyed.

'How can you ask me that? If you think . . .'

'I'm sure everything will be fine, Mum. Don't worry,' I interrupted.

Mum clamped her lips together, her expression thunderous. She stood up and went over to the fridge. I could tell from the way she took out the water bottle and slammed the fridge door shut that she wasn't happy. My going to school was the only thing I'd ever heard my parents argue about. Mum twisted the top off the bottle and tipped it so that it was directly over the yellow painted pottery jug she'd made a few weeks back. Water gushed out, rising up in the jug to slosh over the sides and down

onto the work surface, but she didn't alter the angle of the bottle.

'You'll soon think you're too good for us.' Jude punched me on the arm for good measure. 'Just don't go getting too big for your boots!'

'Of course he won't. And you'll be on your best behaviour at Heathcroft, won't you?' Dad beamed. 'You'll be representing all of us noughts at the school.'

Why did I have to represent all noughts? Why couldn't I just represent myself?

'You must show them they're wrong about us. Show them we're just as good as they are,' Dad continued.

'He doesn't need to go to their stuck-up school to show them that.' Mum came back to the table, slamming the water jug down on the plastic tablecloth.

Milk and water, water and milk – that was all we ever had with our dinner. Unless we were extra short of money, in which case it was just water. I lifted my glass of milk to my mouth and closed my eyes. I could almost smell the orange juice Sephy's family nearly always had at their dinner table. Chardonnay for her mother and a claret for her dad and a choice of fizzy water, fruit juice – usually orange – and/or fizzy ginger beer for Sephy and her sister, Minerva. No bottled tap water for them. I remembered years ago when Sephy had snuck me my first taste of orange juice. It was icy-cold and oh, so sweet and I held each sip in my mouth until it became warm because I was so loath to swallow. I wanted the orange juice to last – but of course it hadn't. Sephy snuck me orange juice as often as she could after that. She couldn't understand why I loved it so much. I think she still can't.

I took a sip of my drink. My juice had too obviously passed through a cow first! I guess I didn't have enough imagination to turn milk into orange juice.

'He'll soon be as stuck-up as them.' Jude prodded me in the same place where he'd just punched me, turning his finger this way and that to make sure that it really hurt.

I put down my glass and glared at Jude.

'Come on then . . .' Jude whispered for my ears only.

I carefully placed my hands on my lap, my fingers interlocked.

'What's the matter? Am I embarrassing you?' Jude teased maliciously.

Beneath the table, my fingertips were beginning to go numb, I was pressing them together so hard. Ever since I'd passed the exam and got into Heathcroft, Jude had become totally unbearable. He spent every waking moment trying to goad me into hitting out at him. So far I'd managed to resist the intense temptation – but only just. I had sense enough to know that if Jude and I got into a fight, he'd wipe the floor with me. I hated it here so much. Oh, to get away. Far away. Even if I couldn't get up and physically leave the table, I had to get out of here before . . . before I exploded.

Sephy . . . Sephy and the beach . . . and Maths . . . and our kiss. I smiled as I remembered her insisting that I wipe my mouth before our first kiss. She did make me laugh.

That's right, Callum. Just drift away. Out of the house . . . back to the beach . . . back to Sephy . . .

She did make me laugh . . .

'You're not listening to a single word, are you?' Mum's rasp cut through my reverie.

'I was listening,' I denied.

'What did I just say then?'

'My new uniform is over my chair and I'm to get up extra early and have a wash before putting them on. My writing books are in the school bag under my bed,' I repeated.

'You heard me. That doesn't mean you were listening!' Mum replied.

I smiled. 'What's the difference?'

'My reaction!' Mum said at once. Smiling reluctantly, she sat down. The atmosphere wasn't perfect, but at least it was better than it had threatened to be less than five minutes ago.

'A son of mine at Heathcroft School.' Dad shook his head, his spoon poised before his lips. 'Imagine that!'

'Shut up and eat your food, fool!' Mum snapped.

Dad looked at her and burst out laughing. Everyone else joined in – except Lynette.

I spooned pasta and mince into my mouth, smiling as I chewed. To tell the truth, I was looking forward to school tomorrow. I was actually going to secondary school. I could make something of myself, do something with my life. Once I had a proper education behind me, no-one could turn around and say, 'You're not smart enough or good enough'. No-one. I was on my way UP! And with a proper education behind me, nothing could stand between Sephy and me. Nothing.